DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 468 907 PS 030 672

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TITLE Developmental Levels of the Child's Storytelling.

PUB DATE 2002-08-00

NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (12th, Lefkosia, Cyprus, August 28-31, 2002).

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Age Differences; Coherence; Developmental Stages; Early Childhood Education; Foreign Countries; Language Acquisition; *Story Telling; Young Children

IDENTIFIERS *Retelling

ABSTRACT

Noting that examining the story telling skills of children between 4 and 8 years of age can provide insights into the child's overall language development, this study explored the development of children's story telling, using story coherence and story cohesion to evaluate the developmental level of the child's story telling. Participating in the study were 45 children, 4, 6, and 8 years old. The children were read a story (The Princess and the Pea) from a picture book and then asked to retell it freely while looking at pictures in the book. Findings showed age differences in both story content and structure and support the significance of story telling as an educational method for language development, with consideration of the child's developmental abilities. Four-year-olds mostly told stories with no structure or with a very simple structure, static descriptions of the book's illustrations. Their stories also showed thematic discontinuations and much repetition. In comparison, 6-year-olds' stories showed significantly more use of structured patterns based on a temporal sequence of events, though still relatively static. Eight-year-olds' stories were mostly structured and contained descriptions of characters' thought and feeling, appropriate relations and connections among them, and causal relations defined. Both 6- and 8-year-olds, in comparison to 4-year-olds, constructed stories with a linear thematic organization with thematic continuity, and used many more pronouns, hypernyms, and hyponyms. Numerous examples from the children's stories illustrate developmental differences in story telling. (Contains 13 references.) (KB)

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ED 468 907

Developmental Levels of the Child's Storytelling

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Summary

The purpose of the present study was to explore the development of the child's storytelling, an important ability of the child's pragmatic use of language, within the broader context of the child's language development. Taking into account several already established criteria (e.g. Fein, 1995; Stein, 1997), we defined key elements for evaluating developmental levels of the child's storytelling, specifically in terms of story coherence and cohesion. The coherence of a story refers to its structure and the connection between different parts of the story. The cohesion refers to the construction of the story. The criteria for evaluating the coherence of the child's story were divided into five different developmental levels: 1. a story without a structure; 2. a story with a structure and simple descriptions of the illustrations; 3. a story with a structure and simple temporal action sequences; 4. a story with a structure and descriptions of the characters' thoughts, emotions or the relations among them; 5. a story with a structure and causal goal-based sequence of events.
The criteria for evaluating the coherence of the story were referring to the thematic arrangement (linear arrangement with and without thematic leaps) of the story and the means for preserving the reference (literal repetition and repetition with pronouns).

Assuming that children of different ages do not possess the same concept of story, we used the criteria developed in the first part to analyze and compare 45 stories told by four-, six- and eight-year-old boys and girls. The children were first read a story from a picture book and then asked to retell it freely while looking at pictures in the book. The results show differences among age groups both in story content and structure and as such support the significance of storytelling as an educational method for language development with consideration of the child's developmental abilities.

Key words: preschool children; developmental levels of storytelling; story's coherence; story's cohesion.

PS 030672

1.0 Introduction

Language as a symbolic system is – particularly through the context of culture and learning – involved in the child's development from the very beginning, through the stages of infant, toddler and preschool child. It codetermines the development of thinking, metacognition, metalanguage, theory of the mind, social cognition, and allows various interpretations expressed with language, as well as distinguishing between what is real and what is imagined. The present study explores how children of various ages

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(during the period of significant quantitative and qualitative transitions in the field of cognitive development and particularly of language) retell stories elicited by picture books, and which criteria (in terms of the content and the linguistic structure of the story or text) are relevant for distinguishing various developmental stages of storytelling.

Pragmatic Use of Language: Narrative

Narrative, like conversation and dialogue, is a pragmatic language skill. It is entirely based on understanding and expressing decontextualized information or content. It differs from dialogue and conversation in several aspects. Any narrative has to be structured, with a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion, and it has to contain a problem (Fein, 1995), while conversation or dialogue is basically an exchange of a few short utterances. Dialogue is frequently related to a specific here and now situation, so that an utterance can be complemented with eye movement toward the intended referent, i.e. with context or extralinguistic content. In narrative, on the other hand, everything has to be conveyed through language, i.e. with intralinguistic content (Fein, 1995; Karmiloff and Karmiloff–Smith, 2001). Hemphill and Snow (1996) believe that in storytelling the child very rarely replies *I don't know*, while this is a common answer to directive questions like *What did you do in the kindergarten today?*, when the child frequently answers *Nothing, I don't know.*

Mendler (1984, in Fein, 1995) distinguishes between a story in which the child describes an event (the event schema) and a true story (the story schema). The former involves merely a string of sequential events, such as *I came to the kindergarten and I met Jack and we had breakfast.* For the latter, the child searches on the level of mental structures, creates and combines various options for the story development and continuation. From the point of view of developmental psychology, stories based on the event schema come earlier, because the young child's mental functioning is still closely related to visualization and direct experience, while mental and linguistic transformations are still rare.

Engel (2000) finds that children use a different narrative style to describe their own experience, events from their daily life, and to deliver a fictional story, which involves more decontextualization and imagination.

Development of Narrative

Results of several studies (e.g. Fein, 1996; Marjanovič Umek and Grad, 1984; Miljak, 1981; Moon, 1986, in Smith and Cowie, 1993; Pellegrini and Galda, 1982; Wimmer, 1980, in Guttman in Frederiksen, 1985) show that until approximately the third year of age children are not capable of telling a story, that they can only produce a simple description of objects, persons, or sequence of events that are not construed on the basis of a mental image.

At approximately three to four years of age, children develop a scheme for conventional storytelling, and from the fourth year on they construct the story as a complex whole,

with a purpose or goal. It is built on an initiating event and the thread of the story is determined by the final goal. It already contains characters' personal features, relations obtaining among them, motivations and feelings; it gradually approaches a climax and is frequently structured around the main character. Affective topics are quite frequent, especially negative ones. Characters' feelings and thoughts are important (Fein, 1995; Marjanovič Umek, Fekonja, Kranjc and Lešnik Musek, 2002). Older preschool children also understand that the narrator is not part of the story but only the person telling it; they are aware that they can control the story and its characters, and they also know what makes a story a story (Fein, 1995).

Engel (2000) describes that a story told by a two-year-old differs from one told by a five-year-old in length, structure and style.

At approximately eight years of age children can – guided by questions or instructions – produce different types of stories, which normally relate to complex, unified events.

Factors Codetermining the Developmental Level of Story

Stories told from the third or fourth year on do not differ only according to the child's age; the developmental level of the story is codetermined also by the circumstances in which it is being told. Guttman and Frederiksen (1985) compared three sets of conditions in which storytelling took place. In the first case children told a story that was illustrated by sequential pictures, in the second case they were offered unconnected pictures, and in the third case a single picture showing all the characters in the story. The highest level of storytelling was achieved when the children had more pictures they could freely combine, and the lowest level was associated with the single picture condition, when the story was mainly reduced to enumerating or naming objects and persons in the picture. As described by Shapiro and Hudson (1991), children get the best stimulation for storytelling from illustrations in which something unexpected, unforeseeable, disruptive, frustrating, or emotionally intensive is happening, e.g. from a picture which shows that cookies got burnt, not only that they were baked. Similar examples are described also by Fein (1995), who finds that main characters' psychological traits are the central guidelines in storytelling and that children's narration focuses on specific problems or conflicts associated with them, e.g. a baby being helpless or a crocodile being mean.

Marjanovič Umek, Lešnik Musek, Kranjc and Fekonja (2003) find that exposure to a purposeful, regular and systematic reading of good children's literature improves the child's storytelling competence. Children aged four to five years who were exposed to additional systematic reading of children's literature told stories with elements of dynamic development creating suspense, with transparent relations among characters, a typical fairytale closure (... *and they lived happily...)*, and with structurally and semantically more complex utterances than their peers who had not been included in a program of additional reading of children's literature.

Story coherence and cohesion

Whether a child is telling a story freely or with the help of pictures or a picture book, his or her narrative is fundamentally determined by two out of the seven textual criteria (Dressler and de Beaugrande, 1992), viz. coherence and cohesion (Karmiloff and Karmiloff-Smith, 2001). Coherence refers to the connected content of a text which makes it obvious that individual parts of a story are developed and connected (Dressler and de Beaugrande, 1992), or, as Karmiloff and Karmiloff-Smith (2001) put it, a story based on a coherent structure is more than a few unrelated sentences which would leave the listener thinking, »So what?« Cohesion, on the other hand, refers to linguistic devices used to link various parts of a story together and to establish logical relations within individual contents, e.g. by using conjunctions to express causal and temporal relations or deictic elements to situate persons and objects in the here and now (Dressler and de Beaugrande, 1992; Karmiloff and Karmiloff-Smith, 2001).

Stein (1997, in Karmiloff and Karmiloff-Smith, 2001) studied story coherence in children of different ages. In her study children aged five, eight and ten years were asked to tell three stories with different starting points: the Fox Story – once there was a big grey fox who lived in a cave near a forest; the Alice Story – once there was a little girl named Alice who lived in a house near the ocean; the Alan Story – once there was a little boy named Alan who had many different kinds of toys. The researchers used a five-category scale to evaluate story cohesion: no structure, descriptive sequence, simple temporal action sequence, reactive sequence, and goal-based sequence of events. The results showed that the oldest children generally produced causal goal-based narratives with fairly diverse phraseology (the highest category), while the youngest age group (the five-year-olds) tended to produce more simple descriptive or temporal action-based narratives (categories 2 and 3).

2.0 Method

Sample

Our study included 45 children aged four to eight years, who were divided into three age groups:
Group 1: children aged 4;0 - 4;6 years;
Group 2: children aged 6;1 - 6;6 years;
Group 3: children aged 7;6 - 8;2 years.
Children in the first two age groups attended a preschool institution, while those in Group 3 were in the second form of primary school.

Table 2.1. Sample structure

Age group	*1*	*2*	*3*
No. of children	15	14	16

Instruments

To examine developmental characteristics of storytelling, an unstandardized *test of retelling a story* was used. The children were asked to retell H. C. Andersen's story *The Princess and the Pea* from its Slovene picture book edition illustrated by Marija Lucija Stupica. The illustrations in the book are prevailingly symbolic.

In evaluating the developmental level of stories told by the children two sets of criteria were used:

1. ***Story coherence.*** This refers to the deep-level connectedness among parts of message and the structure of the story.

Story coherence criteria:

Criteria	*Score*
1. Story with no structure	1
2. Structured story with simple descriptions of illustrations	2
3. Structured story with simple temporal sequence of events	3
4. Structured story with description of characters' thoughts and feelings and of relations among them	4
5. Structured story with description of causal relations	5

1. An example of a story with no structure:

"Here she gave. The queen stepped in a puddle. This, this had a ball. The parrot was in a cage."

2. An example of a structured story with simple descriptions of illustrations:

"Here's a prince. It was raining. The princess is wet and is knocking on a door. The prince opens the door. The queen puts a pea under the blanket and they go to sleep. The princess didn't sleep well. This is the real princess."

3. An example of a structured story with a simple temporal sequence of events:

"There was a king who was looking for a princess. Then he came home. Then it was raining. Someone knocked on the door. The old king opened the door and outside was the princess. She said she was the real one."

4. An example of a structured story with descriptions of characters' thoughts and feelings and their relations:

"The prince wanted to get a real princess. He was very sad. Then someone knocked on the door. It was the princess. The old queen put a pea on the bed and the princess had to sleep there. In the morning she said she was sleepy because she hadn't slept well. Then the prince knew she was a real princess."

5. An example of a structured story with causal relations:

"The prince travelled around the country and looked for a princess who would be a real princess. But each princess had a fault. Then he returned to his home. He was sad and lonely, because he wanted to have a real princess. There was a terrible storm and someone knocked on the castle door. The old king answered the door: "I am a real princess," begged the girl. The young princess had to sleep on pea all night. "How did you sleep?" the king and the queen asked her. "Oh, not well. I didn't close my eyes all night. I had something hard under the blanket." So the queen knew she was a real

princess. Only a princess can feel a pea on the top blanket. And that pea was then taken to the museum."

2. Story cohesion. This refers to the surface structure of the story.

Story cohesion criteria:

A. Thematic organization

Criteria	*Score*
1. Linear organization with thematic discontinuations	1
2. Linear organization with thematic continuity	2

1. An example of linear organization with thematic discontinuations:

"And he ... and he ... he went around the world and he didn't find his princess. Then he again her ... knocks ... she knocks ... there was a knock on the door."

2. An example of linear organization with thematic continuity:

"There was inside was a p ... pp... a pea. Even today you can see it the pea unless someone has taken it."

B. Coreferential devices

Criteria	*Score*
1. Literal repetition	1
2. Repetition with pronouns, hypernyms, hyponyms,...	2

Note 1. In Slovene, unemphasized pronouns functioning as subjects are normally omitted. Such positions, otherwise prime candidates for the use of anaphoric pronouns, were in our analysis ignored. Here, they are indicated with parentheses meaning that children used the normal sentence structure with the unexpressed subject but the correct form of verb agreement. For the sake of simplicity, elsewhere in the text such omissions of subject pronouns are not marked.

1. An example of literal repetition:

*"Then **the prince** ran and came to the door. Then **the prince** noticed the princess, who was completely wet."*

2. An example of repetition with pronouns:

*"It was **the wet princess**. **That** was a real princess.*
*(She) put the pea so that (she) would sleep. Then some we... ... (she) fell asleep. They asked **her** how (she) had slept."*

Note 2. All the examples are taken from the stories in the analysis.

Procedure

Each child was first read the story about "the Princess and the Pea" and then asked to retell it. Children had the picture book in front of them and could examine illustrations at will. The testing was individual, in a special room of the preschool institution or school. Children's narratives were exactly transcribed.

Subsequently, each story was analysed and evaluated using the scoring system described above.

3.0 Results

Table 3.1. Means and standard deviations by age groups

Evaluation criteria	*M(1)*	*M(2)*	*M(3)*	*SD(1)*	*SD(2)*	*SD(3)*
Coherence (1)	1.20	2.85	4.39	1.01	1.46	0.69
Cohesion (2A+2B)	1.53	3.08	3.55	1.25	1.19	0.50
Thematic organization (2A)	0.80	1.61	1.61	0.68	0.65	0.24
Coreferential devices (2B)	0.73	1.46	1.94	0.59	0.71	0.62
Total score (2+1)	2.73	5.92	7.95	2.12	2.56	1.16

Legende:
M(1) ..... arithmetic mean for the group of four-year-olds
M(2) ..... arithmetic mean for the group of six-year-olds
M(3) ..... arithmetic mean for the group of eight-year-olds
SD(1) .... standard deviation for the group of four-year-olds
SD(2) .... standard deviation for the group of six-year-olds
SD(3) .... standard deviation for the group of eight-year-olds

Table 3.2. Differences among age groups in storytelling (coherence and cohesion)

Evaluation criteria	*t-test (1-2)*	*t-test (1-3)*	*t-test (2-3)*
Coherence	3.50**	10.66**	3.59**
Cohesion	3.34**	3.95**	1.46
Thematic organization	3.24**	7.43**	0.02
Coreferential devices	3.07**	5.73**	2.25**
Total score	3.60**	8.96**	2.65**

Legende:
t-test (1-2) ... t-test of differences between the arithmetic means for the four-year-olds and the six-year-olds
t-test (1-3) ... of differences between the arithmetic means for the four-year-olds and the eight-year-olds
t-test (2-3) ... of differences between the arithmetic means for the six-year-olds and the eight-year-olds
* ... sig<0.05
** ... sig<0.01

Table 3.3. Correlations between story coherence and cohesion within individual age groups

	Story cohesion	*Thematic organization*	*Coreferential devices*
Story coherence (1)	0.76**	0.79**	0.68**
Story coherence (2)	0.87**	0.72**	0.24
Story coherence (3)	0.56*	0.46*	0.49*

Legende:
Story coherence (1) ... *story coherence in the group of four-year-olds*
Story coherence (2) ... *story coherence in the group of six-year-olds*
Story coherence (3) ... *story coherence in the group of eight-year-olds*
** ... sig<0.01
* ... sig<0.05

4.0 Discussion

The results, both statistical and qualitative, confirm that the categories designed for evaluating developmental levels of storytelling were reasonable and that they reflect ordinality in development, both in coherence (connectedness of the content) and cohesion (use of linguistic devices to connect parts of the story).

When coherence of stories is analyzed, significant differences in developmental levels among the three age groups are found (Table 3.2). Four-year-olds mostly told stories with no structure or with a very simple structure. Their narratives were more or less static descriptions of illustrations in the picture book. Stories told by six-year-olds were – compared to those of the four-year-olds – on a higher developmental level, with a significantly more frequent use of structured patterns based on a temporal sequence of events, still relatively static. And stories of the eight-year-olds were mostly structured and contained descriptions of characters' thoughts and feelings; appropriate relations and connections were established among them; and the stories already contained causal relations.

Similarly, stories of the six- and eight-year-olds differ significantly from those told by the four-year-olds in the domain of cohesion, both in the total score and in the two partial scores, thematic structure and coreferential devices. Four-year-olds tended to tell stories with thematic discontinuations and a lot of repetition. Six- and eight-year-olds, on the other hand, generally constructed stories with a linear thematic organization with thematic continuity and used many more pronouns, hypernyms, and hyponyms. Differences in all three scores were statistically significant. Differences between Groups 2 and 3, the six-year-olds and the eight-year-olds, on the first partial subscore, thematic organization, were very small and statistically not significant. The results show that most six-year-olds already achieve the higher level within this criterion, i.e. linear organization

with thematic continuation. On the second score, use of coreferential devices, however, their results were significantly lower.

Both the results showing differences among age groups in the domains of coherence and cohesion (Table 3.2.) and the results showing correlations among coherence and cohesion within individual age groups (Table 3.3.) invite a more detailed analysis of what happens in the middle group, the six-year-olds. At this age, children are obviously already capable of producing situationally and semantically appropriate texts, but their surface structure remains relatively simple (frequent lexical repetitions to preserve coreferential links to extralinguistic referents. Six-year-olds' pragmatic competence is higher than their grammatical competence – their mastery of the principles of how, when, where, with whom, about what and why to speak (the pragmatic principles) is better than their mastery of grammatical rules which help to create text. Compared to the four-year-olds, the six-year-olds make a qualitative leap in picture book elicited story retelling, especially in the domain of thematic organization. When the eight-year-olds are compared to the six-year-olds, a similar qualitative leap happens on the structural level of language.

Correlation between story coherence and cohesion (for both partial results) is strong and statistically significant in the four- and eight-year-olds. In the six-year-olds, it is statistically significant when coherence is compared with the total cohesion score and with the first partial score (thematic organization), while correlation between coherence and the second partial cohesion score (coreferential devices) is weak and statistically insignificant (Table 3.3.). Six-year-olds' stories were usually coherent, events were arranged in temporal sequences, characters' thoughts and feelings were described, there were few thematic discontinuations, but certain difficulties were noticeable in appropriate use of linguistic patterns (anaphoric pronouns, use of hypernyms or hyponyms, etc.)

Developmental level of storytelling is in the six-year-olds higher than in the four-year-olds, and in the eight-year-olds it is higher than in the six-year-olds. This agrees with results of comparable studies (e.g. Fein, 1995; Marjanovič Umek, Fekonja, Kranjc and Lešnik Musek, 2002; Stein 1997, in Karmiloff and Karmiloff-Smith, 2001) reporting on development of storytelling as a complex process encompassing both the content and the linguistic structure.

To illustrate the difference between the lower and the higher developmental levels of storytelling, here are two examples of the story about *The Princess and the Pea* retold with the help of a picture book by a four-year-old and an eight-year-old respectively.

Four-year-old
Peas ... she puts ten so peas that something at night she couldn't close her eyes at all ... Then later there was a very bad storm and they said ...
one man that king ... well then the next day they prepared many peas twenty ... and many feathers ... twenty feathers then they put it in the museum and unless someone has taken it ...

Basically, this story is structured, but the structure does not reach beyond description (perceptive recognition) of illustrations in the book. There are many thematic discontinuations in it, no theme is fully developed, the child switches from one theme to another (the theme of the first sentence is *pea*, that of the next one is *the storm*, etc.). Extralinguistic referents are often difficult to identify because the child does not use full lexical words (e.g. we do not know who put peas in the bed). To create cohesion, the same connective word is repeated all the time (*then*).

Eight-year-old
Once there was a prince who wanted to marry a real princess. But he didn't know about any princess if she was a real princess. One day it was raining very heavily. And all of a sudden someone knocked on the door. The king went and opened the door and he saw a pr... a prin... a princess, who was wet through. ehm He let her in ehm and the queen said to herself, "We're going to see whether she's a real princess". And ehm she threw all the blankets from the bed to the floor and put a pea on the bottom of the bed. Then she put on twenty blankets ehm and said ehm to the princess, "Well, you'll sleep here". Then ehm the next morning they asked the princess, "How ... how did you sleep?" The princess answered, "Not well. ehm All night ehm I lay on something hard, so that I have all, whole bruises on on my body". Then ehm the next day the princess married her and ehm and the pea is even today in the museum, unless someone has taken it.

The story contains explicit expressions of causal relations (a key action followed by others, as well as the characters' thoughts and feelings and relations among them). The surface texture of the text displays linear organization with thematic continuity: the initial theme is followed by a rheme, which in the next sentence becomes the theme and is associated with a new rheme, etc. (*The king went and opened the door and he saw a princess, who was wet through. He let her in. – The king* is the theme of the first sentence and it combines with a complex rheme. A detailed analysis of the rheme would show that a part of it (*the princess*) becomes the theme of the relative clause, in which it is represented by the relative pronoun *who*. In the next sentence *let her in* is the new rheme and it is related to the theme of the first sentence, *the king*. Extralinguistic reference is first established through using a full lexical word and then maintained with pro forms, e.g. the personal pronoun *her*, the indefinite pronoun *someone* (which establishes a specific indefinite reference), while the main coreferential device is morphemic agreement (forms of the verb which show the person and number of the subject – see Note 1).

The results of this study, which are of interest for both psychological and linguistic explanations of the development of child language, may be related to one of the important components of pragmatic language use, viz. narrative or storytelling. The latter has been gaining an increasingly prominent position in preschool curricula, both for younger and older children, as well as in the lower grades of primary school. To obtain more valid results, both from the point of view of theoretical analysis (testing the existing criteria for narrative evaluation) as well as their applications in learning and teaching, further studies are needed to compile and analyze - using the criteria developed in the present study – stories told by children of different ages under different conditions, e.g.

elicited by a picture book with variations along the real-symbolic continuum; without elicitation; or with limited elicitation (only a title, or only a few key words). It would also be interesting to compare storied told by children coming from different family or institutional backgrounds and possessing different degrees of reading literacy.

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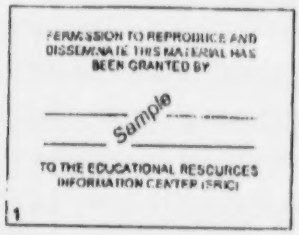
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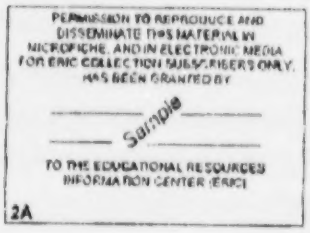
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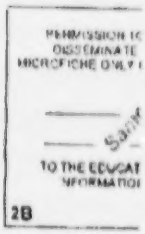

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